

“This is How it Became Saint Roch Church...” Church History in the Light of Written Sources

The Saint Roch church stands at the edge of the square named after it, in the district known as Belsőváros (Inner Town). This district is the oldest inhabited part of the town; it was once the town centre, entirely surrounded by the River Tisza. Csongrád fortress may have stood at the northern tip of this island with the settlement below it stretched out towards the west and steadily expanding.¹ After Sándor Károlyi (1669–1743) purchased Csongrád in 1722 together with the land around it from Count Leopold Schlik (in Hungarian: Lipót Schlik), an imperial general², he built his manor house here, next to the ruins of the fortress from the Turkish times.³ After the Turks withdrew, a tiny chapel built of reeds and mud stood on this site, at what is today No. 4 Saint Roch Square.

In 1704, after the arrival in Csongrád of parish priest László Goricsánszky, the inhabitants rebuilt the chapel from wood and reinforced it

with stone columns. This building did not stand for long either; in 1706 the church community erected a new building, this time of lasting material.⁴ According to an episcopal church visitation in 1715 it was dedicated to Saint Stephen.⁵ Shortly after the episcopal visit the church burnt down, so in 1718 the visitor found only an oratory of reeds.⁶ The present Saint Roch church was built to replace the destroyed Saint Stephen church and until 1769 (the consecration of the church of Our Lady) it served as the town's parish church.

The circumstances of its construction are unclear, some of the available data is contradictory. According to Lajos Dudás “a part” of the church had earlier been used as a military store that was converted into a church in 1722.⁷ László Tari was of the opinion that general Lipót Schlik had the building erected, while its sanctuary may have been the remains of the foundation of a Turkish





minaret dating from Turkish times.⁸ The records in official church documents are equally vague: from the first half of the 18th century they name either general Schlik⁹, or the people of Csongrád¹⁰, as the builders of the church, but in some cases Schlik figures only as a supporter.¹¹

However the church documents – that were almost certainly used as a source by later local history writings – are in conflict with contemporary sources found in the Károlyi family archive. These reveal that in 1722 at most the preparatory work for the construction could have started, and in reality work on the building of the church began only in the spring of 1723 – by then at the orders of Sándor Károlyi. There can be no doubt that it must have been the people of Csongrád who initiated the work, they must have urged already in 1722 that funds be collected for the construction of the church, and perhaps they also began to buy building materials and dig the foundations. In a letter written to his wife, Krisztina Barkóczy on 29 November 1722 Sándor Károlyi enthusiastically reports that the wholly “papist” Csongrád is in the process of building a church.¹²

Finally, because of the unfavourable winter weather, the work did not begin until March 1723. The construction was supervised by János

Széplaky, the bailiff of Sándor Károlyi’s Csongrád–Vásárhely estate, who informed his employer in a letter written on the 9th of March that he had begun to build the Csongrád Catholic church.¹³ But, as he wrote in one of his letters, the “dreadful bitter cold” held up the work until the beginning of June.¹⁴ The master builder, the stonemasons and other craftsmen who took part in the work were probably among those, who also worked on the construction around that time of Sándor Károlyi’s manor house in Csongrád and his castle in Szegvár.¹⁵

The congregation must have made a substantial financial sacrifice in contributing to the construction, but without the support of the patron they would probably only have been able to erect a more modest building. This is implied by the bailiff in one of his letters addressed to Sándor Károlyi, in which he reports that the “papists” of Csongrád had offered to make mud bricks for the construction but he recommended that they build the church of bricks, because it would be “more comfortable and more lasting”.¹⁶

Because Schlik was no longer the Csongrád landowner at the time when the work began, he cannot be linked to the construction of the

church. However, it cannot be excluded that before his departure Schlik may have made a donation for the construction, or they may also have used materials from the demolition of the buildings he left behind.¹⁷

Since the sources in the Károlyi family's archive confirm the role of Sándor Károlyi as the builder of the church, the question arises of why his name does not appear in church documents dating from shortly after completion of the construction work. We have no information on this but can only speculate that a dislike on the part of the people of Csongrád for the person of the new holder of the advowson lies behind the "silence". While general Schlik was only the nominal lord of Csongrád, who largely left the town's self-government alone provided that a small quit-rent obligation was met, immediately after taking possession of Csongrád Károlyi set about organising it: he ended the free choice of magistrate, imposed a produce tax (*discretio*) in addition to the rental fee on his grazing land leaseholders, raised taxes substantially and on several occasions, demanded for himself the revenues from the inns and butcher's shops, and occupied for his estate some of the land that had previously been available for anyone to cultivate.¹⁸ Sándor Károlyi must also have caused considerable dissatisfaction when, in 1726 he obliged his serfs to perform villein services.¹⁹ According to Széplaky, Károlyi's bailiff the people of Csongrád "are so angered [by these measures] that rather than performing them, they will be prepared to leave the town a wasteland".²⁰

When it was completed and equipped, the church was consecrated to the Assumption of Mary (*Assumptio Beatae Mariae Virginis*). It is first mentioned in the visitation protocol of 1726, where it is noted that it had recently been entirely rebuilt and that the advowson belonged to Sándor Károlyi.²¹ The patron provided for the renovation and maintenance of the church, as well as the remuneration of the parish priest and his assistants. The cantor and parish priest

could not be appointed, the assistants dismissed or replaced without the approval of Sándor Károlyi.²²

Veneration of Saint Roch, patron saint who provided protection against the plague, appeared after the epidemic broke out in Csongrád.

The plague reached the settlement in 1738, when Gergely Vintze was parish priest. The epidemic claimed 726 victims in the space of a year. The parish priest also helped to care for the dying. On one occasion when the faithful of Csongrád, fearing for their lives and their loved ones, gathered in the church, parish priest Vintze called on the desperate parishioners to appeal to the patronage of Saint Roch and make a vow to build a chapel. The assembled congregation agreed, then led by parish priest Vintze bearing the Host, they held a procession around the town. "At last the merciful Lord took pity on the tears of his children, who [...] committed not only themselves but also their descendants for as long as Csongrád stands, to celebrate the day of that patron saint with a pilgrimage."²³ When the epidemic was



over they built a chapel in honour of Saint Roch in the centre of the cemetery²⁴ on the site where the church of Our Lady now stands.²⁵

The saint who gave protection against physical and mental disorders became exceptionally popular in Csongrád. The majority of boys born in August were traditionally christened as Roch (Rókus). With some exaggeration, cantor Antal Sohlya declared in 1860 that “every third person in Csongrád is called Roch”.²⁶ There was no change in this trend right up to the First World War, despite the fact that in the second half of the 19th century the local liberal press took a stern view of the spread of the “horrid, foreign-sounding” name.²⁷

Requiem masses were regularly held in the Saint Roch chapel – as a funeral chapel – and on the day of Saint Roch (16 August) a feast day mass. It is certain that the chapel was dedicated not only to Saint Roch but also to Saint Sebastian and Saint Rosalia.²⁸

Thus, after 1738 there was a parish church of Our Lady, and a Saints Roch, Rosalia and Sebastian chapel. In 1754 Archdeacon György Némethy wrote in his report of the building that was barely thirty years old: “the church built of solid material is not sufficient for the size of the population, it has no tower, and it is tolerably equipped”.²⁹ Since the church had no capital, it was maintained with donations from the local people, charitable foundations and the profit from its land. A belfry first mentioned in the 1745 visitation substituted for a church tower. It was presumably made of wood, because by 1761 it was in a ruined state. At first it had three bells, later this increased to five.³⁰

The church had barely thirty pews meaning that only a small fraction of the parishioners could crowd into it. Eventually even the Károlyi family recognised that the construction of a new church was unavoidable. For this reason they contributed a substantial sum for construction of today’s parish church of Our Lady that was completed by 1769.

In 1856 the Csongrád parish priest recorded in the *Historia Domus* that the Saint Roch church was used as a military store after 1769.³¹ However the contemporary visitation protocol written in 1778 makes no mention of any such thing, indeed it writes of its three altars and their appointments.³² What appears to be certain is that in 1781 the building was in need of renovation.³³

In 1784 parish priest András Kanyó had the chapel of Saints Roch, Sebastian and Rosalia demolished, and its main altar erected in Belsőváros.³⁴ It was then that the church that was transferred to filial status was dedicated – now exclusively – to Saint Roch.

Since the new parish church was designed on a larger scale to meet the needs of the time, the family holding the advowson presumably judged it unnecessary (and too expensive) to maintain two churches in Csongrád and so the settlement became the holder of the advowson for the Belsőváros church. Up to that point there is no record of any negotiations between the settlement and the landlord-patron family. The absence of an official document and the resulting uncertainty can also be deduced from an entry made in 1915 by the Csongrád parish priest Károly Thúry naming the local council as the “quasi” that is, the unofficial patron of the Belsőváros church. This quasi-patron state is the result of the tradition based on custom (*usus*), that the town *had always* provided for the renovation and maintenance of the church.³⁵

What is certain that after 1769 the Károlyi family maintained the new parish church, the presbytery and its outbuildings, while the town cared for the Belsőváros church, the cantor’s home and the two homes for bell-ringers. We also know for certain that from 1784 the town also provided the everyday supplies needed in the Saint Roch church.³⁶

The building of the tower represents an important stage in the construction history of the church. The foundation stone was laid on 24

September 1818. Various commemorative documents and coins were placed in an iron box beside it.³⁷ The statues of Saint Roch and Saint Joseph that can be seen on the edges of the half-pediments of the tower were probably placed at the same time.

Together with the veneration of Saint Roch, the veneration of Saint Sebastian and Rosalia also continued for many years. Rosalia was one of the most common female christian names in Csongrád, and in the 19th century a statue of her still stood in the Belsőváros church. The church's "old bell" that was cast in 1825 and then requisitioned for military use in 1917, was decorated among others with a relief of Saint Sebastian.³⁸

There was a cemetery in use around the Saint Roch church from an unknown date right up to 1866.³⁹ The places of the graves could clearly

be seen on the ground for decades afterwards; in times of flood or inland waters the people of Belsőváros crossed the site on planks laid between the graves.⁴⁰

In 1904 the diocesan bishop of Vác attempted to obtain recognition of the Roman Catholic church's ownership exercised over the Saint Roch church in Csongrád. He held out the prospect that he would only drop the proceedings if the right of use was transferred in perpetuity.⁴¹ The Csongrád council accepted the offer with the condition that the diocesan bishop of Vác cover the full court costs. Thus, after 1905 the right of use in perpetuity of the Saint Roch church was transferred to the Roman Catholic church. The owner of the church today is the state of Hungary.⁴²



Endnotes

- ¹ See: Bél 1980–1981/2. 50. Cf.: Map of the settlement of Csongrád made by Sámuel Mikoviny in 1731.
- ² The Csongrád estate, that belonged to the Szeged prefectorate of the imperial chamber after the Turks were driven out, was awarded to Lipót Schlik in 1702 in recognition of the role he played in the Treaty of Karlowitz and his other military merits. In 1722 he sold it to Sándor Károlyi, whose ownership was officially registered on 20th December 1722. Kovács 1929. 11–20; Éble 1911. 7–16.
- ³ Sándor Károlyi's manor house stood at No. 4 Saint Roch Square (Szent Rókus tér), beside the northern bastion of the fortress. Mátyás Bél also mentions it: "The remains of this once very strong fortress can be found in the bend of the Tisza. [...] The fortress is connected to only one, inner angle of the bend, that which looks toward the north, it is strengthened by the junction of the Körös opposite and is surrounded by a system of extremely deep moats. The Turks also guarded it vigilantly. Nothing is left of it now except the remains of the moats, within which stands the manor house of Sándor Károlyi." Bél 1980-1981/2. 44. From 1722 to 1769 this dwelling that can still be seen was the Csongrád presbytery building. NPI Historia Domus Vol. I, 107.
- ⁴ VPL LVis. Lib. 17. 147–150.
- ⁵ VPL LVis. Lib. 3. 92–94.
- ⁶ In addition to the donations of the inhabitants, profit from the vineyards owned by the parish ensured its upkeep. VPL LVis. Lib. 3. 102-103; Tari 1977. 11.
- ⁷ Dudás 2000b. 69.
- ⁸ Tari 1977. 11.
- ⁹ VPL LVis. Lib. 6. 1761. 37.
- ¹⁰ A church inventory made in 1754 gives the population of the town as the builder ("ex fundamentis erecta sump-tibus oppidanorum"). See: VPL APar. Cs. 1754. Status Ecclesia.
- ¹¹ According to the Acta Cassae Parochorum inventory of 1734 the church was built at the expense in part of general Schlik and in part of the town people, in 1722. In: ACP 1976. 54.
- ¹² "Perhaps you did not know, so I am telling you that Csongrád is entirely Papist, they are now building a whole church of stone, they do not tolerate Calvinists among them." Kovács 1994. II. 436 (letter No. 284).
- ¹³ "Moreover I have begun the building of a Papist church." MNL OL, P 398, 70873.
- ¹⁴ "I had wished to effect the work to be built for the Papists, but because the dreadful bitter cold weather was unfavourable, I was obliged to defer, now I have had the timber brought because with the help of the Lord the weather is clearing and becoming more obedient, some of the people offered to make mud bricks, but I wish to build it from this, it would be more comfortable and more lasting." MNL OL, P 398, 70874.
- ¹⁵ MNL OL, P 398. 70863–70923. Letters from the Csongrád-vásárhely bailiff János Széplaky to Sándor Károlyi.
- ¹⁶ MNL OL, P 398, 70874.
- ¹⁷ Sándor Károlyi began new construction already in March 1723 on the site of Schlik's former farm. We have no information on what buildings stood on the site at that time. MNL OL, P 398, 70873. ("Judging the buildings to be good, I have had the foundations laid on the site of Schlik Excellency's farm, and have raised some of the walls according to your Excellency's instructions").
- ¹⁸ Kovács 1929. 25–32.
- ¹⁹ Kovács 1929. 36.
- ²⁰ Cited in: Kovács 1929. 32.
- ²¹ This entry in the protocol (as well as the findings of archaeological and architectural exploration) and the uniform structure of the church refute the views that the present church is the result of alterations to an earlier building.
- ²² When in 1736 Csongrád parish priest Gergely Vintze replaced the cantor without the patron's knowledge, Sándor Károlyi wrote a letter reaffirming his rights arising from his power of advowson. VPL APar. Cs. 1 July 1736. Letter from Sándor Károlyi to the magistrate of Csongrád.
- ²³ Bodnár 1864. 364.
- ²⁴ At that time the town had two cemeteries: one on the site of what is now the church of Our Lady, the other around today's Saint Roch church. VPL LVis. Lib. 6. 1761.
- ²⁵ NPI 1761. Canonica Visitatio, "De Capellis et Coemet-eris"; Bodnár 1864. 364. In the 19th-20th centuries as the Saint Roch day feast approached, the Csongrád press regularly wrote about this event, but they gave mistaken information about the nature of the epidemic, the year, the person of the priest or the number of victims.
- ²⁶ Sohlya (manuscript) 1857. 321.
- ²⁷ "But why do they not enlighten the parents at christenings, in the registry offices, the schools, in public life, that it is a laughable thing to give their children such horrid-sounding names as Franci, Viktor, Henrik, Rókus instead of christian names like László, Ödön, Béla, Árpád, Aladár, Gyula, Géza, Atilla, Zoltán, Hajnalka, Gyöngyike or Sarolta." *Csongrádi Lap*, 20 September 1903, Vol. XIII, No. 38, p. 2.
- ²⁸ Palugyay 1855. 477. It is worth briefly tracing the changes in the vernacular use of the terms little church - big church. On the basis of 18th century sources [VPL APar. Cs. 6 March 1736. Letter from the Csongrád magistrates and residents to the Consistorium] it seems likely that at the time the people of Csongrád called the funeral chapel "little church" and the church of Our Lady (today's Saint Roch) was the "big church" (1738–1769). After the construction of today's church of Our Lady (1769) and the demolition of the funeral chapel (1784) the vernacular "little church" name was transferred to today's

Saint Roch church [VPL APar. Cs. 28 May 1781. Letter from the Csongrád magistrates and Council]. Since the Saint Joseph church was built in Csongrád-Piroskaváros (1928) this church came to be called “little church”, and the Saint Roch church is called “Roch church” or “Belsőváros church”.

²⁹ Zsilinszky II:1898. 103. In the 1740s the revenues from a watermill on the Tisza also contributed to its maintenance. VPL LVis. Lib. 4. 14 May 1745.

³⁰ VPL LVis. Lib. 4. 14 May 1745. (“prope Ecclesiam in Turri campana tres”); VPL LVis. Lib. 6. 26–29 June 1761. (“campanili ruinato”)

³¹ NPI Historia Domus Vol. I, 108.

³² VPL LVis. Lib. 7.

³³ Zsilinszky II:1898. 269.

³⁴ Tari 1977. 12; NPI Historia Domus Vol. I, 108.

³⁵ NPI Historia Domus Vol. II, 23.

³⁶ In 1877 the following items appeared among the regular expenditures of the church: wax (for candles), fabrics (for the repair of vestments), fish fat (used on the bells), tallow, soap (to wash clothing), firewood (to bake wafers) and communion wine. Repairing the bell straps and minor carpentry work were tasks that had to be performed every year. We read on the invoice made out by master saddler Rókus Szemerédi: “I repaired the straps of the

bells during the year and sewed leather on the clapper four times during the year” [MNL CsML CsL Council Documents. Documents of accounts and expenditures of the Saint Roch church in 1877.] The church curator received a separate payment for the cleaning and ironing of vestments, and the bell-ringer for baking wafers and organ treading. The town authorities generally timed the completion of major investments (e.g. replacement of pews, windows, painting) to coincide with the church feast day.

³⁷ In one corner of the tower there is an iron box containing a commemorative document written by notary Miklós, “that chief magistrate György Adamovits dipped in wood oil and placed in the iron box together with the thrown coins, then placed the box in the foundation.” Tari 1977. 15. Thrown coins: the money people threw into the box when it was carried around. Dudás 2000b. 69.

³⁸ NPI 1885. Inventory of Saint Roch church.

³⁹ NPI 1761. Canonica Visitatio, “De Capellis et Coemeteris”; NPI Historia Domus Vol. I, 107.

⁴⁰ *Csongrádi Újság*, 3 May 1908, Vol. VI, No. 18, p. 1.

⁴¹ MNL CsML CsL Council Documents, 9 January 1905 jk. No. 9.

⁴² NPI 6 September 1905. Extract from the minutes.